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ABSTRACT

Lectures have a place in educational history and even a place in today's classroom, but students must be exposed to more than one style of teaching. After 20 minutes of listening to a lecture, most students reach a saturation point. To realize their maximum potential, students must do more than just listen in the classroom. They must engage in activities and dialogue regarding the course materials. Teachers can use some simple techniques (other than lecturing) to encourage students to recognize the meaningfulness of a subject. Pausing at least three times during a lecture to allow for discussion among the students may help them clarify and assimilate the information. Sometimes "lectures" should be based on students' questions about a particular chapter. Student-led discussions move students from passive to active participation. Cooperative learning activities can be used in the classroom to enhance students' learning and develop their social skills. Problem solving is another useful active learning activity. Demonstrations can be used to stimulate students' curiosity and to improve their understanding of conceptual material and processes. Role playing situations allow students to experience situations. Games, debates, and simulations add variety to the classroom setting. Barriers to change include the following: teachers may feel very uncomfortable when trying something new; and administrators offer few incentives to change. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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# "Hello...Hello? Is anybody listening?": Teacher as Listener in the Classroom

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## Part I

We (teachers) should be self-monitoring, self-exploring, and self-changing practitioners ...we need to be instructionally aware (Weimer, 1992).

The days when teachers walked into classrooms, placed notes on the lectern, and began lecturing (only pausing long enough to breath), are long over. Or are they? There are some very serious, very real teachers who start class at the sound of the bell, hold forth the full period, never relaxing their grips or their lectures for a second. Perhaps over time, these teachers have become enchanted by their voices or their power. And perhaps, this enchantment fosters a false sense of success in their teaching, so much so that they can look beyond the bad days and continue on with their daily lectures.

Lecturing is almost synonymous with teaching. It is the method by which we were taught, and in most cases it is the method by which we teach. Lectures have their place in the history of education. They even have their place in today's classroom. However, students must be exposed to more than one style of teaching. Just because lecturing has history behind it doesn't mean that it is the best teaching method. Believing this is like accepting that the horse, while once the most common form of transportation, is still the only way to travel. I'm afraid it just isn't so.

Just as there are new modes of transportation on the highways, there are new modes of teaching in the classrooms. And

it is our job as teachers to choose the mode or method which takes the student where he or she needs to go. This presentation examines a teacher's role as listener in the classroom. Plus, it offers suggestions on how to gauge and encourage student comprehension of materials through a wide variety of activities.

In classrooms all across the world, students alternate passively between note taking, daydreaming and listening. Yes even in the best classes, students daydream. This isn't difficult to believe if one considers the concept of a speech thought differential. Wherein we speak at rates of between 125-175 words per minute, but we can process information at more than 400 words per minute (Gronbeck, 1992).

This lapse leaves a large amount of time for students to focus on information other than the class material. Time for them to daydream, write notes to friends, or just plain not pay attention. We have all experienced some form of the speech thought differential, and we cannot turn a blind eye to this behavior.

Another issue to consider when discussing the value of lecture is the concept of saturation. Saturation deals with an individual's inability to listen effectively to even the most exciting lecturer over a sustained period of time. Studies have shown that after as few as ten to twenty minutes of lecturing, students become confused and bored (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). This boredom causes students to tune out the droning voice, and thereby reduces the amount of information learned from the lecture. This tuning out might explain why lectures are less

effective at promoting student thought and changing student attitudes.

In order to realize their maximum potential, students must do more than just listen in the classroom. They must be engaged in activities and dialogue regarding the course materials. We cannot continue to think of students as vessels of knowledge. They are more than mere containers catching the words which drip from their teacher's lips. Education has to be more than simply lecturing students. It has to be meaningful to students.

What makes a lecture meaningful? Boeree (1991) believes that it is "relevance to the listener's own existence, well paced development of a problem and resolution of that problem, plus concrete, real-life imagery that encourages imaginative participation and identification." Meaningful lectures must actively engage students about their world, their perspectives, and their existence. It must be new and vital, not a collection of notes from past decades. The lecturer should weave words into a wonderful, real story which captures and holds the students' attention. However, I don't believe that this is the case in most lecture situations. Rather, I fear we lecture our old ragged notes because they are what we know and where we have been.

Kahnweiler (1991) made this rather tongue in cheek statement about lectures. "It takes less work on my part to dole out information...I can deliver my lectures without interruptions and take some pride in seeing people take copious notes as I speak." Even with this rather antagonistic statement in mind, I would

support the necessity of some lecture in the classroom but with this ground rule in mind. Lectures can make a difference if they are centered on the students' needs, not on the needs of the instructor.

Part II

> Teaching well is an extremely difficult job; there are so many balls to keep in the air, so many minds and wills to engage (Crowell, 1987).
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> *
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> The process of designing a classroom structure which meets my hopes and expectations requires that I first overcome my own perceptions (Cramer, 1990).

So if we aren't going to go into class and lecture the full fifty minutes, what are we going to do? There are many techniques that encourage students to recognize the meaningfulness of a subjects that doesn't revolve around lecture. These techniques include pausing, student questions, student led discussion, cooperative learning, problem solving, demonstrations, role playing, debates, and games/simulations. Each of these methods will be discussed in turn.

Pausing:

Pausing is a way of modifying the basic lecture format. Student learning is enhanced if the lecturer stops at least three times during the lecture to allow discussion over what has been shared. Students simply turn to each other for approximately two or three minutes and compare information. This "puts the focus

on clarifying and assimilating the information presented" in the lecture (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

I have incorporated this simple technique into my lectures, and it seems to be very productive. It aids students in understanding what they have heard, while allowing a slight reprieve from the current lecture. It also helps reduce saturation by allowing for a shift in student focus.

Student questions:

Allowing for student questions at the end of the lecture is another way to modify a lecture. There is more to this than just giving a quick response to the student and moving on to another question. Rather at the end of the class, students are allowed to ask questions about information they don't understand. On the next class day, the questions and issues raised are addressed in detail.

Another form of student questioning is to allow each student to ask a question on a particular chapter or subject the day prior to the discussion. The lecture would then cover the questions asked by the students not the chapter as a whole. This method asks students to share in the responsibility of shaping the lecture. This is more work for the lecturer because he/she would have no idea what to cover until the day before the lecture. However, it does respond to student interest rather than rote lectures.

Student led discussions:

Student led discussions move students from passive learning to active participation. In these situations it is a must that

teachers let students take over. In this case, the role of the teacher is to listen to the students. However from time to time, it may be necessary for the teacher to facilitate these discussions by clarifying misinformation, asking probing questions, ensuring adherence to task, ensuring participation, etc. Most importantly, one thing the teacher should not do is dominate the discussion. Instead, he/she must respect students as thinkers and learners, and allow them the freedom to search for answers.

Rhodes and Schaible (1992) state, "We ask all students to prepare to be the discussion leader. Obviously, a student who prepares to lead discussion is well prepared to participate... Pick a leader and two supporters at random and turn the class over to the students...We do not contribute until near the end of the first half of the period. Instead, we listen, attempting to learn the students' level of understanding of the material, and to see which issues are of compelling interest to them."

These seem to be the basic rules for student led discussions. We must realize that the discussions will not always go smoothly. They will be marred by confusion, mistakes, and lapses in thought. However, these are all natural occurrences in the realm of critical thinking, and students can learn much from their mistakes when constructing meaning for themselves.

Cooperative learning:

Goals of cooperative learning are two-fold: to enhance


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> students' learning and to develop students' social skills like decision making, conflict management and communication...(Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

Cooperative learning is geared towards enhancing a student's academic and social skills. Small groups work together to understand a particular issue or task. "Duration of these activities may be from one class to a whole semester (Bonwell and Eison, 1991)."

In the case of cooperative learning, the group shares the same grade. However, this does not eliminate the possibility for individual grades. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue, "Also, with individual accountability, all group members will contribute and not rely on the high achievers to do all the work." It is a group effort which encourages students to learn from each other in a fairly nonthreatening manner.

In cooperative learning, students attain the highest reward only if all other members of the group perform well. Thus, every student rewarded under a cooperative learning basis has an interest in seeing that other members in the group perform well (Ravenscroft, 1991). This fosters a sense of shared responsibility which individual learning practices do not address.

The teacher's role in cooperative learning is to serve as facilitator, moderator, and evaluator. Again, this is an activity which requires the teacher to listen and observe more, and speak less. I have used this in my interpersonal class with much success. Students work well together, and help each other

over difficult tasks. I have rarely experienced any negative criticisms from this approach.

Problem solving:

Problem solving is a very useful active learning activity. It enables students to understand information not just as words on a page, but as real life situations. The instructor might use real or fictitious case studies which address issues raised by the course material. Students are then allowed to find solutions for the problems. This method forces students to make decisions and enhances their understanding of the importance of the information being covered.

Demonstrations:

Demonstrations can be used to stimulate students' curiosity and to improve their understanding of conceptual material and processes (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). I teach courses in basic public speaking where demonstration is an essential feature of the course. The students learn a great deal from watching each other present speeches. Perhaps they learn what makes a good speech because they experience one, and this causes them to adopt some winning strategies for their own speeches.

Whatever the case, students learn by doing and seeing. For instance, one of the few lessons I remember from grade school was a lesson on mercury. I remember the teacher gently placing the element on a tray; all the while, he was warning us of the danger of touching it. I was held spell bound, and to this day I have not forgotten the warning. This is demonstration working at its most basic level. Demonstration is a common way children learn

in the home and early school grades. We should maintain its use in more advanced coursework whenever possible.

Role playing:

"We may use a role play situation to demonstrate compellingly some concept of unusual importance...(Crowell, 1987). Or we may use role playing to demonstrate some common issue that is over looked due to its mundane features. Whichever the case, in role playing students are allowed to experience situations that they may currently face or face in the future.

Role play situations can be real or fictitious, scripted or unscripted, and rehearsed or unrehearsed. Students can spend moments or hours on them. Guidelines depend on the facilitator. However, it is my believe that each role play situation should be followed with discussion of the what was learned and felt by the participants and observers.

Debates:

Debates helps reduce instructor bias. They allow for discussion of both sides of an issue. They also promote logic skills, increase oral communication and research skills. However, debates have to be run following guidelines set forth by the class and/or teacher. Debates also force students to look at their own biases, and make decisions as to whether they are correct or not.

Games/simulations:

Games and simulations add variety to the classroom setting. How many of us would enjoy a steady diet of mashed potatoes, and mashed potatoes only? Not many? The same is true of students who

are subjected to straight lecture. They need a wide variety of activities, and games offers a fun way to learn.

> "Perhaps the strongest and clearest justification for simulations and games lies in the concept of unblocking. Often there is resistance to learning on the part of a person... Unblocking also occurs because the person is no longer passive recipient of instructions or information but is rather an active and involved participant (Hyman, 1977)."

The active involvement of the student establishes an exciting environment in which learning can take place, while consciously empowering the student with the powerful realization that they control at least some of their own educational destiny.

These are just some of the activities, other than straight lecture, in a teacher can engage students. Whichever we decide to use, we need to listen to our students in attempts to comprehend their understanding of particular topics. And we need to run the risk of loosing control, in order to win the battle of the "education blahs."

If you are wondering about student reactions, I can offer many but perhaps one will suffice. Recently a student in my interpersonal class wrote the following (unsolicited) passage in her journal, "I'm also learning that learning itself, does not have to consist of a poker faced, boring instructor droning on. Learning can be taught by a fun instructor who enjoys what they're teaching and incorporates fun/educational activities into

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the class."

Part III

> Education involves ....making sense of things together. Thus a class format that stress talking among students and faculty, as opposed to talking at students by faculty, is surely the very essence of what education should and can be (Rhodes and Schaible, 1992).

Stop for a second and think back on the most exciting lecture you ever heard. Do you remember it at all? Was it rare among the many you heard? Now, think of the most exciting class you have ever found yourself in, what made it different from the pack? Perhaps, the teacher was creative, innovative, or simply mindful of the students' needs. No matter the case, we cannot continue to base our teaching on outdated educational models.

It has been said that the three basic reasons for the enjoyment of teaching are that it keeps us learning, it concentrates our focus, and it gets results (Crowell, 1987). I agree with all but find the third factor, results, most important. These results are tabulated in the successes or failures of our students. And I for one haven't met the teacher, who wishes failure on his/her student. Rather for our students, we wish good judgment and wise decision making which reach beyond the confines of our classroom, and which enables them to succeed on a far greater scale. To reach these goals, we must listen to their voices as they rise to teach us. It seems that if we

"calmly, non-defensively listen to them (students), we can in fact understand (Boeree, 1991)" their ideas.

What barriers to change do we face? Perhaps the first lies in the expression (pardon the poor grammar) "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Yes, lectures do work to some degree. Most all of us, had to pass the muster of listening to and repeating lectures. The lecture classroom is stable, and students know what to expect. However, this might be giving them just what they don't need. It is very easy for students to get use to letting someone make all their decisions. This must not be allowed to happen. We must encourage to students to think, if we want them to think. So perhaps the lecture isn't "totally broken," but I fear it has a huge crack in its core.

Another barrier is in the "Let Mikey try it! He'll try anything!" expression. Trying something new makes us nervous at best, and terribly uncomfortable at worst. For the most part, the worst thing that can happen when trying something new is the activity might fail to meet the desire objective. To this I say, "If at first you don't succeed..."

Finally what I see as the most troublesome barrier is that administration offers so few incentives to change. We all know it takes time to redesign courses, and this coupled with an already full schedule is not very appealing to most teachers. In a perfect world, administrators would make allowances by giving release time; sadly, the world isn't perfect. And unfortunately, I do not have the solution to this problem. I would just encourage teachers to start out with small measures, and

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gradually change their courses.

As teachers we dream of rekindling this joy of learning. And thankfully, our beginning and end does not hinge on fifty minutes of lecture. It does not even hinge on fifty times fifty minutes. Rather, it hinges on building a solid foundation of students with strong voices. We might not be Robin Williams' character in Dead Poet's Society, and it is doubtful that our students will call out "Oh Captain, My Captain" after us. Yet, we can inspire our students to greatness. We can motivate, hone, and lead our students into "their" future. We do this by listening with heart and mind to the glorious, knowledgeable voices of our students.

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